Artist specializes in painting names on boats

By Mary Haines

When he's not in the Langley Air Force Base graphics department, you're likely to find him painting the name on a waterman's boat. Though he's a graphics illustrator by profession, it's hard to say where his job ends and his hobby begins. For Ivan Muza, the pen and brush are at home both at work and off duty.

A muscular man with dark eyes and a curling mustache, Ivan Muza is modest, yet serious, about his art work. When he speaks of art, his reserve turns to confidence. Much of his assurance has developed in recent years as he learned to perfect his skill.

A self-taught artist, Muza started with pen and ink sketches while a young boy growing up in Poquoson. "I used to get into trouble over drawing in class," he recalls.

During his two and a half years in the military, Muza worked as a mechanic. But he never abandoned his love of art: "I started painting at a marina in upstate New York while I was in the Air Force. I painted boat signs in exchange for a skiff."

When he returned to Poquoson in 1963, he put his pen and brush to work in the graphics department at Langley Air Force Base. Today he runs Base Graphics which provides graphics support for the fighter wings. His current work allows him to be creative in a variety of media to include calligraphy, posters, cartoons, and book cover designs.

Though he closes his office at day's end, Muza never leaves his art behind. After-hours and weekends he paints signs, trucks, and buildings as well. "I make what I call mad money with it."

Muza is quick to point out the difference between an illustrator which he considers himself, and an artist. "I think an artist is a person who, when you put in a room without windows and ask to paint a scene of a mountain and trees, does it." In contrast, an illustrator "goes to a file, gets a picture and draws it. He depends a lot on short cuts and working with deadlines."

But, according to his wife Sally, there's more of the artist in him than he is willing to admit. She proudly explained that his artistic endeavors extend beyond graphics. He designs their Christmas cards, prints caligraphy verses, and paints bug shields for trucks, a recent fad. As a cake decorator with little ability to draw, she admitted that he does some of her drawings and a lot of her writing.

Born and raised around boats, Muza gravitated naturally toward his hobby of painting boat signs. "Now I specialize in boats," said the artist who draws his letters free-hand. In an age of stencils and stick-on letters, Muza's talents are in demand, especially by commerical fisherman who are his biggest customer.

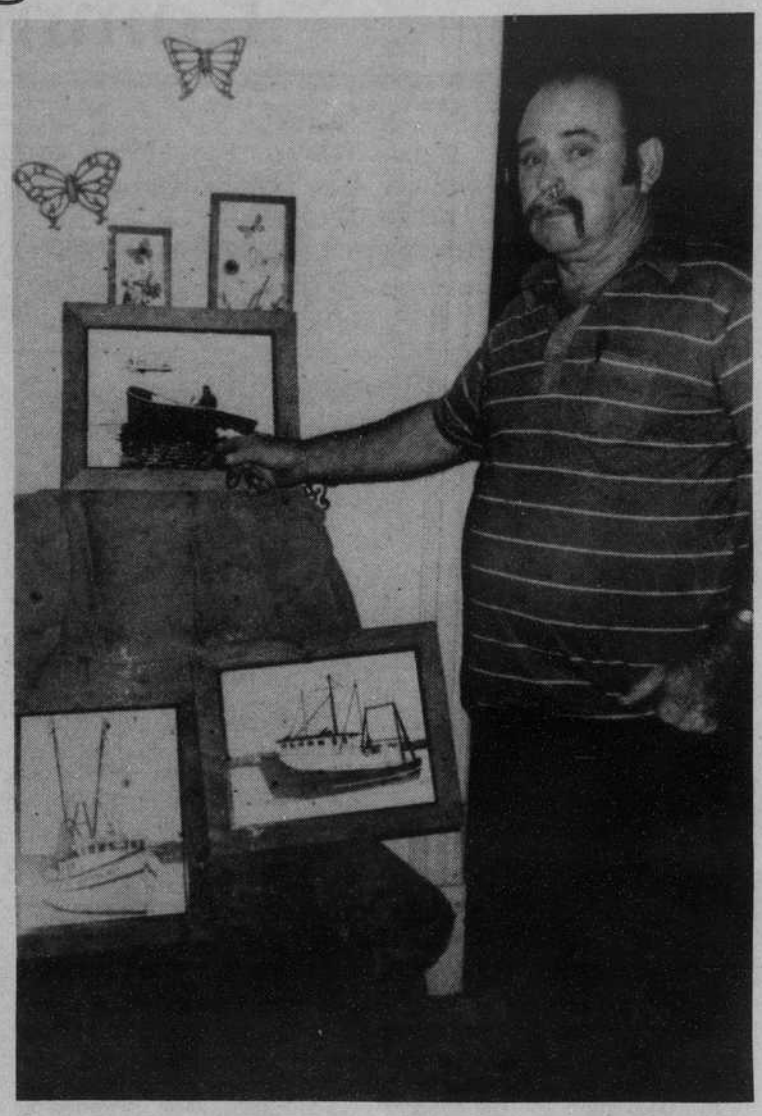
They "have an intense pride in their boats--that's what puts the bread and butter on the table," observed Muza. Most haul their boats for maintenance twice a year and paint them annually.

Though Muza paints boats almost year round, "now is a slack season," he explains. Once March arrives and fishermen begin to haul their boats, the artist will have little free time. His brush will again sweep along each hull in smooth, steady strokes as he repaints the boat's name. And to distinguish his work from others, instead of his signature or initials, he adds a flourish, a few strokes of the brush that leave a simple design, his trademark.

To make his job easier, Muza devised a simple tool, a long stick onto which he affixes wax pencils at intervals needed for the specific size of the letters he will draw. Starting at the bow, he runs the stick along the hull while the pencil marks the lines in easily removable wax. Drawing the name on an average boat takes about one to one and a half hours.

The Poquoson artist has painted hundreds of boats since he began in 1955. "When I started out I didn't like people watching. Now it doesn't bother me." Muza attributes the change to experience as well as to age. "Confidence is a major factor."

As you get older, he added, "you're willing to try new and different things." While modest about his artistic accomplishments, Muza agreed that over the years he has broadened his artistic pursuits. He has come a long way from the days he was caught drawing in the classroom. He still dabbles in pen and ink sketches. And recently he experimented with sketches of his grandchildren on velour. Unhappy with the outcome he decided to save the frames and toss out the drawings. "A person is his own harshest critic," observed Muza.



Ivan Muza shows pictures of some of the boats that he has painted the names on. (photo by Mary Haines)

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